

2017

Music as a Bridge and Platform for Personal, Cultural, and Societal Change: The Work of Billie Holiday

Adrienne Auer

Dominican University of California

Survey: Let us know how this paper benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.dominican.edu/senior-theses>

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Auer, Adrienne, "Music as a Bridge and Platform for Personal, Cultural, and Societal Change: The Work of Billie Holiday" (2017). *Senior Theses and Capstone Projects*. 90.
<https://scholar.dominican.edu/senior-theses/90>

This Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Capstone Projects at Dominican Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Theses and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of Dominican Scholar. For more information, please contact michael.pujals@dominican.edu.

**Music as a Bridge and Platform for Personal, Cultural, and Societal Change: The Work of
Billie Holiday**

A senior project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Bachelor of Arts
in Humanities and Cultural Studies

By
Adrienne Auer
San Rafael, CA
December 5th 2017

Robert Bradford, M.A.
Adjunct Professor of English and Humanities

Chase Clow, Ph.D.
Chair, Humanities Division

ABSTRACT

Billie Holiday came into this life faced with many hardships and struggles. She was raised with harsh realities and hard choices inherent in an inequitable culture that allowed discrimination, segregation, disenfranchisement, and continued acts of oppression and brutality. Her life story, her musicality, her songwriting, her autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues*, and the feeling that she put into almost everything she touched created a lasting legacy. This essay examines how Billie Holiday was able to channel her emotionality and her life experiences into her music. It draws from Billie Holiday's autobiography and her songs, from the work of noted music and jazz historians, and from social activist Angela Davis. The life and the life work of Billie Holiday can be used to shed light on the transformational power of music as a vehicle for both personal and cultural change. Although Billie Holiday was an iconic figure, this ability to communicate and alter one's personal, sociological, and cultural perspective through the arts, in this case music and literature, is accessible to and through each and every one of us.

Table of Contents

1. Copyright page	2
2. Abstract	3
3. Table of Contents	4
4. Dedication and Introduction	5
5. In The Beginning...The Blues and Jazz	6
6. The Blues as a Conduit for Personal, Cultural, and Societal Expression	7
7. Blues and Women’s Expression	8
8. And Then Came Billie	10
9. Jazz, The Harlem Renaissance, Speakeasies, and Bordellos	12
10. Holiday in Harlem	15
11. On the Road	17
12. Holiday’s Musical and Lyrical Abilities: The Magic Touch of Lady Day	19
13. Holiday’s Transformational Impact on the Popular Jazz Songs of Her Era	22
14. “Strange Fruit”	25
15. Holiday’s Legacy	30
16. Tribute ...For Billie (A poem inspired through my research)	32
17. Appendix	32
18. Works Cited	35

Dedication and Introduction

Dedication

As an American

*I want this paper to dip
to flow
to get with the groove*

to look, to move...and create a deeper more real understanding of

*The
Countless and seldom counted brilliant, beautiful ones who have paid dearly throughout
lifetimes
For luxuries others have enjoyed without remorse*

*Luxuries gained with exploitation and brutality, and insane, ongoing, thoughtlessness and
actions
to open eyes, and hearts, and minds
and to allow the possibilities to merge and expand into a realm of... consciousness... dominated
by compassion...kindness...and respect.*

Introduction

Since its inception, America has been engulfed in the struggle to find an equitable balance within a multi-cultural society that has favored the white population. A legacy of oppression, brutality, societal constructs, and backward-thinking biases has aided in promoting a lack of shared inter-cultural compassion and understanding. This has led to cultural schisms and divisions in American society that continue to manifest in destructive and unproductive ways. In order to move toward becoming a society that honors and truly respects all of its members, Americans need to create and utilize cultural bridges that assist in promoting intra-cultural respect, and pave the way to a constructive cultural metamorphosis.

Music is a form of communication that can be harnessed to create opportunities for both personal and cultural transformation. Culture and music do not occur in an encased bubble. They interact. They transform and expand each other. They both, in their own way, are meant to create opportunities: to merge, get messy at times, wash over existing boundaries, and in doing so, help create new musical and cultural realms. People, music and culture are all in an evolving cycle. Artistic expression can be a formative and powerful tool for healing and change. This report examines Billie Holiday's ability to transpose her woes, her struggles, and her hopes into her art. An inquiry into the life of Billie Holiday and the impact of her artistry proves that life experience, passion, and emotion channeled through music can be a conduit to initiate personal, cultural, and societal change.

In The Beginning...The Blues and Jazz

In America, the blues and jazz are products of our unique cultural evolution. Professor Elijah Wald of UCLA remarks, "Some of the most distinctive elements of what would come to be known as blues can be traced to West Africa: common rhythms, instrumental techniques that were adapted by banjo players, fiddlers, and eventually guitarists, and a rich and varied range of singing styles" (12). Through the institution of the slave-plantation system, the African Diaspora introduced America to the unique rhythms and musicality of the West African cultural experience. America became a meeting ground for multicultural musical exchange that transcended previously existing cultural and societal boundaries.

The blues and jazz became a forum for a blending of musical knowledge bases and an opportunity for cultural expansion and change. Renowned music critic and author Nat Hentoff notes:

As the slaves came to America from all over West Africa and from all levels of West Africa's social hierarchy, so the settlers of the new continent had come from all over Europe and from all classes of European society... The juxtaposition of the two musical worlds could have led to almost anything—and in fact, did lead to so many varieties of music that no one so far has been able to list more than a tiny fragment. (Hentoff and McCarthy 8)

Through this process, America formed its own uniquely American-made musical styles. Hentoff and McCarthy note, "...in America the whole tradition of syncopated popular music owed its origin to the slave. This meant that Afro-American music became a part of the people..." (9). Acclaimed musician and jazz critic Ted Gioia addresses the Americanization of African music and the Africanization of American music. He notes, "Anthropologists call this process *syncretism*—the blending together of cultural elements that previously existed separately. This dynamic, so essential to the history of jazz, remains powerful even in the present day, when African American styles of performance blend seamlessly with other music of other cultures, European, Asian, Latin, and coming full circle, African" (5). It is this syncretistic musical process that can create portals to a plethora of avenues and opportunities for understanding and compassion that can lead to both personal and social change.

The Blues as a Conduit for Personal, Cultural, and Societal Expression

Blues music and blues performers were part of an expanding form of communication that created lasting platforms for personal and social expression. In his book *The History of Jazz*, Ted Gioia notes, "More than any other forms of early African American music, the blues allowed the performer to present an individual statement of pain, oppression, poverty, longing, and desire. Yet it achieved all this without falling into self-pity and recriminations. Instead the blues offered

a catharsis...” (11-12). Author Buzzy Jackson includes many firsthand accounts from formative blues musicians in her book *A Bad Woman Feeling Good; Blues and the Women Who Sing Them*. “‘The blues is a thing deeper than what you’d call a mood today,’ explained composer W.C. Handy, self-proclaimed ‘Father of the Blues.’ ‘The blues came from the man furthest down. The blues came from nothingness, from want, from desire. And when a man sang or played the blues, a small part of the want was satisfied from the music’” (9). This catharsis was not confined to the performers: it spoke to the trials and tribulations, and addressed the loves and losses of the audience. Jackson states, “Blues music was meant to engage its listener on multiple levels—the sensual, the physical, and the emotional” (10). The blues became a way to share, reinvigorate and add to the collective and personal experience of being African American in America. Jackson notes, “The dual-meanings often found in African American culture—what W.E.B. Du Bois called ‘double-consciousness’—the struggle to reconcile the contradiction of being both African and American—made blues music all the more important, as its performance became an exorcism of repressed emotion shared between performer and audience” (10-11). Blues music became a form of communication that helped to express experiences and feelings related to the restrictive, inequitable dualisms that black people individually and culturally faced and are still struggling against in America.

Blues and Women’s Expression

It was through this process of self-expression that blues music opened a means of communication for the individual and shared experiences of African American men and women in America. Jackson states, “The African-American tradition of creating intensely personal music that spoke to the heart of each individual persisted in women’s blues, allowing women to express viewpoints often silenced in other areas of the broader American culture” (11). Benefits

of this emerging mode of expression would create a ripple effect that continues to be musically inspiring, emotionally cathartic, and culturally and socially enriching. Jackson goes on to note, “Wherever they performed, the early blues women let their souls out, bringing with them a new style of singing and playing that would radically change American music, allowing it to become more emotionally deeper, more individually expressive, and more open to improvisational changes than its European dance-based songs” (11-12). In addition to creating a forum for expressing women’s story, female blues vocalists introduced America to the concept of African American beauty and elegance. Formative blues divas Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith created personas that steered the image of black women performers away from the previously promoted exotic dance hall imagery. This evolving image put forth the socially needed concept of black women in positions of power and leadership. As vocalists, blues divas stepped forward and took command of the stage. They initiated an awareness and appreciation for an empowered imagery of black women performers that highlighted the appeal of strength and elegance. However, for the most part, their music was aimed at and enjoyed by a predominantly black audience.

Bessie Smith, a 1920s blues singer, laid the foundation for the image of the African American woman as a diva. She set an example physically and musically that would influence the 1920s restricted perceptions of African American women. In addition to her musical contributions, Bessie brought to life the concept of the African American diva. She was a phenomenal vocalist. She was lovely and captivating and demanded respect. Her outfits when performing were often dazzling gowns embellished with sequins, and she incorporated big bold feathers into her accessories. Professor Wald notes, “[A]lthough the blues queens [such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey] wore gorgeous gowns and appeared in the most prominent black theatres, they were far from typical pop stars. Their records sold to white customers as well as black, but

their core audience was African American women—whether in the South or in the growing ghettos of the urban North and Mid-west—and they sang about that audience’s concerns” (25). One of their listeners was young Eleanora Fagan, who would later in life become known as Billie Holiday, or Lady Day. It was the blues, the blues queens, and jazz music that laid the foundation of musicality and imagery that inspired young Eleanora and was a component that compelled her determination to transform herself and her life through the art of music.

And Then Came Billie

Eleanora Fagan was born on April 7, 1915, to Sara “Sadie” Fagan. Sadie was an unwed teen mother. Eleanora’s father, Clarence Holiday, was not part of Eleanora’s childhood. Her mother, Sadie, was fired for being pregnant. She scrubbed floors and tended to patients at a hospital to pay for the delivery of her baby. Sadie remained in Philadelphia and sent her baby, Elenora, to live with relatives in Baltimore. This set the pattern for Eleanora’s childhood in which she would move back and forth between relatives and her mother with a stint in a Catholic reformatory to boot. Award-winning jazz journalist and autobiographer Stuart Nicholson notes, “Being shunted from household to household and the gradual realization that she was not the most important person in her mother’s world began to have a profound effect on Eleanora’s psychological well-being”(22). Her father’s absence in her childhood, his reticence and refusal to claim Eleanora as his child or to be an active responsible father during her life, also had severe detrimental effects on Eleanora’s emotional development.

Eleanora’s childhood was marred by issues stemming from an inequitable societal legacy that resulted in high instances of single mothers, absent fathers, broken families, poverty, and a lack of opportunities for economic advancement. Her childhood traumas were severely acerbated due to being raped as a child by a neighbor. Eleanora’s harsh life experiences reflect a sample of

the callous abusive treatment that women of color faced in America. In her autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues: The Searing Autobiography of an American Musical Legend*, co-written with tabloid journalist William Dufty, Holiday reflects on being raped as a child. Holiday states, “Even if you’re a whore, you don’t want to be raped. A bitch can turn twenty-five hundred tricks a day and still she don’t want nobody to rape her. It is the worst thing that can happen to a woman. And here it was happening to me when I was ten” (16). Although Holiday’s book has been reputed to have stretched the truth, it is an excellent reference into her insights and her life experiences. Award-winning jazz journalist Stuart Nicholson confirms that Billie’s book is an insightful source for certain information. Nicholson notes, “I had come to regard Billie Holiday’s autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*, with suspicion...[y]et, to my surprise, it became clear that it hit major episodes in her life square in the face. For example her childhood rape, an episode treated with much caution and caveats by commentators through the years...actually took place with consequences exactly as Billie had described” (6).

Holiday’s autobiography exposes the world she came to maturity in and how music became a driving force in her life from an early age. Holiday notes:

But whether I was riding my bike or scrubbing somebody’s dirty bathroom floor, I used to love to sing all the time...Alice Dean used to keep a whore house on the corner nearest our place, and I used to run errands for her and the girls...When it came time to pay me, I used to tell her she could keep the money if she’d let me come in her front parlor and listen to Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith on her victrola. (10)

For Eleanora, music became an avenue for emotional release, a learning mechanism and a creative outlet. “Sometimes the record would make me so sad I’d cry up a storm. Other times the same damn record would make me so happy I’d forget about how much hard-earned money

the session in the parlor was costing me” (10-11). Biographer Meg Green’s book shows how Eleanora’s life continued to flux between her relatives and her mother’s care until Eleanora was in her early teens. It reveals that Eleanora was drawn to the risqué fast-paced musical world of Harlem and the affectionate companionship she shared with her mother. In it, Green states, “Finally reunited with her mother, Eleanora moved to Harlem...[t]he building was home to Florence Williams, a noted Harlem madam. To earn money, Sadie had begun to work for Williams and in a short time Eleanora also became one of Williams’s girls. At age 14 she earned five dollars for every trick she turned” (12). In her autobiography, Holiday reflects on the inequitable cultural realities that restricted their earning abilities. She notes, “In the early thirties when mom and I started trying to scratch out a living in Harlem, the world we lived in was still one that white people made. But it had become a world they damn near never saw” (42). Holiday’s craft as a vocalist began behind the strict confines of societal and cultural segregation that was a result of rampant racial discrimination. Her ability as a performer would be a part of a musical, cultural, and social movement that would open doors for a much needed cross-cultural communication, and become a vehicle to convey the experience of being black in America across previously hard-wired boundaries. Holiday’s connection to music was part of an expanding social revolution that is still in the process of attempting to establish an inclusive, equitable, non-racist society in America.

Jazz, The Harlem Renaissance, Speakeasies, and Bordellos

In the early twentieth century, black America was experiencing a major demographic shift. Many African Americans were relocating and moving in a northward migration. They were drawn by job opportunities associated with an expanding industrial age and by the desire to escape continuing horrific conditions of oppression, segregation, and racially

motivated violence that plagued the Southern United States. During this time, Harlem became a Mecca for African Americans moving northward. According to Gioia, “Harlem in [the late 1920s] symbolized a coming of age for all African Americans...who participated vicariously, if not in fact, in the formation of a community where they could exist not as a minority culture, dependent on the tolerance or philanthropy of others, but as a self sufficient body” (89). This demographic shift in Harlem initiated an evolving social structure that supported a blossoming of self-expression and promoted expression of the African American experience.

The spark that drove this developing cultural revolution came – in large part -- through the arts. Gioia also notes, “In this new setting, however, an entire cultural elite had come together, drawing confidently on the full range of human expression in poetry, fiction, visual arts, music, history, sociology, and various other disciplines in which creative thought could flourish” (89). Harlem became a gathering place for both community and for communication through artistic expression. The artistic and cultural awakening inherent in the Harlem Renaissance would become a beacon that would extend its influence into the cultural curiosity that was beginning to unfold and erode previously hard-wired boundaries between whites and people of color in America. Greene comments on how the Harlem Renaissance was ground zero for the establishment of an African American community, and how Harlem artists and performers initiated an artistic revolution that would wash across previous societal boundaries. She states, “From a social perspective Harlem was a city within a city. By the 1920’s, moreover, Harlem had come to occupy an important place in American intellectual and political history, thanks in part to the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural ferment that gained black art, music, and literature a wider audience and greater acceptance” (14). The development of an African-based

community promoted a surge of artistic expression that created opportunities for artistic and cultural exchange between the black community and mainstream America.

Jazz music is an art form that is truly an American tradition. It is an amalgamation whose beginnings are rooted in slave songs, ragtime music, and the blues. Jazz was cradled in brothels and fed by the jazz bands of New Orleans in the early nineteenth hundreds and spread to areas such as Chicago and Harlem in New York. Harlem nightclubs and dance halls such as the Cotton Club, The Black and Tan and the Savoy Ballroom became hot spots of entertainment. Harlem jazz music and the jazz scene became fundamental in the development of American culture, both musically and socially, through creating a cultural bridge for the severe division between blacks and whites in America, and by opening avenues of expression that promoted acculturation.

Greene also notes that during the shift from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, “The emergence of a complex set of ideas and values called *modernism* made jazz acceptable to a wider audience. Modernism helped to break down an older way of thinking and living known as Victorianism...many Americans, especially members of the younger generation...sought the freedom to express themselves intellectually, emotionally and sexually” (5). Modernism initiated the slow, arduous process of unraveling the tightly bound social barriers between white and black cultures in America. In New York, white patrons were drawn to Harlem for a taste of the previously forbidden fruits of African American artistry.

During the nineteen-twenties and thirties, the blues and jazz music went through a growth process that would, eventually, flow across harsh, segregated cultural confines. In order for this to occur successfully, mainstream Americans had to be receptive to these cultural changes. They had to, at least briefly, suspend a phobia, aversion, or denial system regarding being black in America and allow themselves to be receptive to African American-based forms of

entertainment, and be willing to explore other, alternate, cultural forms of artistic expression. “Harlem in the late 1920s was a society precariously balanced between two extremes” (Gioia 89). Nightclubs and the nightlife drew the attention of a new curious, rebellious generation of young adults wishing to escape the rigid confines of repressive Victorian societal influences. Gioia states, “In the world of Harlem nightlife, the consumption of black entertainment by an affluent white clientele came to be known as slumming” (116). This started a trend that would escalate and lure affluent whites into Harlem in search of novel, risqué adventures.

Greene notes how this trend was exacerbated by prohibition. “With the coming of prohibition in 1919, whites converged on Harlem” (14). Her book includes a reflection on Harlem from Holiday’s book *Lady Sings the Blues*: “[e]very night limousines would wheel uptown,” [Holiday] recalled. “The minks and ermines would climb over one another to be the first one through the coal bins or over the garbage pails into the newest spot that was ‘the place’” (14). The free, fun-loving times experienced by white patrons came with a high price tag for the suppressed African American community, and the black performers who performed in Harlem’s speakeasies and nightclubs. Jackson notes, “By the late 1920s...[Harlem] had already become a destination for white New Yorkers seeking an exotic thrill...But many of the clubs...were known for their overwhelmingly white audiences, and blacks were only welcomed as performers and waiters...the grimmer realities of daytime life in Harlem were literally invisible to the whites who made their evening trips uptown” (59).

Holiday in Harlem

It was during this formative era that Holiday developed her craft as a vocalist and created her own individualized musical palate that was inspired by the unfolding blues and jazz idiom. In turn, her contributions would, ultimately, transform the very medium she was a part of. In order

to accomplish this, Holiday had to navigate a society plagued with segregation and division not by *de jour* Southern Jim Crow laws, but by the covert *de facto* social constructs of the North that continued to support and promote white privilege. “Harlem in the late 1920s was a society precariously balanced between two extremes” (Gioia 89). Holiday, like many other African American performers of the time, faced hardships due to cultural segregation and the marginalization and mistreatment of African Americans.

In the beginning of her career, Holiday and other black performers were allowed to perform for white audiences and then were quickly shuffled out the back door and out of sight. This double standard did not sit well with Holiday and other black performers. In her book, Holiday states, “You can be up to your boobies in white satin, with gardenias in your hair and no sugar cane for miles, but you can still be working on a plantation” (97). As a black performer in a white-dominant culture, Holiday was forced to navigate the inequitable racism that had been a formative cornerstone of the American experience. In her book, she recalls:

[W]hite musicians were “swinging” from one end of 52nd Street to the other, but there wasn’t a black face in sight except Teddy Wilson and me... There was no cotton to be picked ...but man, it was a plantation anyway you looked at it. And we had to not only look at it, we lived in it. We were not allowed to mingle in any way. The minute we finished with our intermission stint, we had to scoot out to the back alley or go out and sit in the street. (97)

Although the Harlem Renaissance initiated a cultural revolution, it would be the precursor to a long, still-continuing battle to establish an equitable, non-racist American society by promoting acculturation between the two divided cultures.

At the height of the jazz age, Harlem featured eleven nightclubs that catered to high-class whites, as well as “five hundred colored cabarets of lower ranks” according to *Variety*. It is easy to condemn the leading Harlem establishments for the patronizing attitudes on which they were built. Nonetheless, they served to mitigate, however clumsily, the currents of racism that were running rampant in other social institutions. (Gioia 118)

Although conditions remained, and still remain, inequitable for African Americans, contributions of the artists actively engaged and inspired by the Harlem Renaissance were pivotal in initiating a much-needed elevation of social consciousness in America.

On the Road

Life on the road for black jazz and blues musicians was intensely difficult. During the nineteen-thirties, there was ample availability of work for jazz and blues musicians who were willing to go on tour. Although the pay was marginal, many musicians found employment touring jazz and blues circuits in the Eastern, the Mid-Western, and Southern United States. Conditions for musicians on tour were stressful and emotionally demanding. Many band members had to bear the brunt of social restraints and abuses related to racist attitudes and biased social structures in order to take care of basics such as dining and lodging. In addition to having to safely navigate a racist society, tight schedules and the demands of being a performer increased the intensity of the rigors of life on the road.

The demands of this experience were intensified for black women performers who had added stresses and vulnerabilities due to being a female traveling with a group of men in a male-dominant racist society. In light of these restrictions, the support of male band members became crucial for women on the road. Greene comments on Holiday’s time traveling with Count Basie and his band: “The camaraderie on the road between Holiday and the band did not disguise the

difficult conditions under which they traveled. Life on the road in the Depression was tough on any band; for a female singer, it often proved to be nightmarish. African American bands found the conditions even harder; for Holiday touring became a living hell” (46). In her book, Holiday highlights the hardships she encountered on the road, and tells how most of her wages were spent on providing for her basic needs and maintaining the elegant image that her work as a vocalist required. “I joined Count Basie’s band to make a little money and see the world. For almost two years I didn’t see anything but the inside of a Blue Goose bus, and I never sent home a quarter” (56). Despite the pitfalls and rigors of life on the road, touring provided jazz musicians like Holiday with much-needed exposure and, although meager, a source of income. In addition, touring brought the music of black performers to the consciousness of the populace of many American towns and cities and increased Americans familiarity and appreciation for jazz and the blues.

*“I’m the girl who went West in 1937 with sixteen white cats, Artie Shaw and his Rolls Royce—
and the hills were full of white crackers”* (Holiday and Dufty 70).

When Holiday joined up with Artie Shaw to sing in his band, she became a featured performer in a multi-racial collaboration. Her work as a front person would stretch the fabric of racism binding American consciousness. Holiday notes, “The sight of sixteen men on a bandstand with a Negro girl singer had never been seen before—in Boston or anywhere” (70). Holiday relished the stir she created when she would show up to gigs with Shaw in his Rolls Royce. Shaw’s inclusion of Holiday in his band was groundbreaking because it went against the established cultural norm. According to Greene, “Shaw was the first [bandleader] to hire a [full-time] black female singer to tour with an integrated band in the segregated South” (49). Unfortunately, when Holiday toured the South with Shaw and his band, the novelty of her

situation was the impetus for an intensified racist response. Shaw was aware that touring with Holiday could be problematic, but he didn't allow racist societal pressures or Holiday's fiery nature to deter their creative endeavors. In his biography on Holiday, Stuart Nicholson, Professor at Leeds College of Music, includes a reflection from Shaw about Holiday's Southern tour with his band. "I knew there was going to be trouble," said Shaw, "because Billie was a pretty hot tempered woman... I could see trouble brewing when we went below the Mason-Dixon line and we took her down there, I don't want to repeat the language, but it was rough stuff'" (103).

Holiday was not the kind of woman to take abusive behavior lying down. She was in a process of elevating her social status, and was not going to be trod upon, forced into submission, or interrupted by backward-minded racist behavior. Greene comments on the conditions Holiday had to navigate on the road: "Throughout the tour Holiday suffered indignity after indignity. She was often refused service at restaurants and diners or was forced to eat in the kitchen, surrounded by her bandmates. In a Kentucky restaurant when another customer uttered a racial slur, Holiday attacked the customer; and was smuggled out to keep her safe" (50). In the long run, Holiday found conditions on the road to be so utterly debasing, and combined with the fact that she brought home a meager wage from these endeavors, she realigned her focus, for a time, to the evolving Harlem music scene.

Holiday's Musical and Lyrical Abilities: The Magical Touch of Lady Day

The voice as an instrument is unique in music because of its intimacy and its humanness. Being a vocalist and listening to singing opens one's psyche experientially. There is a component to singing that opens channels of vulnerability. This gives singers the ability to become a conduit for a multitude of stories and emotions. According to Greene, "This carefully woven tapestry of life and music was the origin of the persona that audiences came to identify with Billie" (31).

More than any other instrument, singing has a compelling, emotional, and tonal quality that provides a connective tissue for the human experience. Each vocalist has his or her own unique instrument and approach to the musicality and the lyrics of a song. A vocalist's signature comes not only through the instrument but also through an emotional take on the material. According to Buzzy Jackson, "The metaphysics of American popular music begins and ends with the question of soul. This is the otherworldly aspect of music, the part of a song that is separate from the mechanical issues of melody, tempo, time signature and timbre" (47). For vocalists, soul is the glue that binds the components that form a specific approach to a song. The force that empowers soul is emotion. Holiday notes, "Young kids always ask me what my style is derived from and how it evolved and all that. What can I tell them? If you find a tune and it's got something to do with you, you don't have to evolve anything. You just feel it, and when you sing it other people can feel something too" (39). Holiday's approach to the craft of singing hinged on her unique style and interpretations of the material she performed. Her groundbreaking technique and the emotionality she infused into the songs she sang left a lasting mark on the material she performed.

One of the strongest components of jazz is improvisation. Improvisation is one factor that gives jazz its phenomenally expansive nature. Billie Holiday considered herself to be a jazz musician. She brought the power of improvisation into her songs, and in doing so gave each song and each performance of a song its own unique signature. According to Holiday, "Everyone's got to be different. You can't copy anybody and end up with anything. If you copy, it means that you're working without any real feeling. And without feeling, whatever you do amounts to nothing" (48). As a vocalist, Holiday's vocal range was limited, and was not her greatest asset. Where she excelled was in her excellent sense of rhythm, her absolutely amazing ability to veer

from the melody, to bend notes, and, in doing so, create inspirational tonalities and rhythmic phrasing that enhanced the heartfelt emotionality she so artfully conveyed. Through example, her creative use of the microphone permanently transformed vocalists' abilities to express a range of emotions by making softer vocal nuances audible and by creating added punch, depth, and resonance. Greene notes that Holiday "...was...the first to sense that technology had changed musical performance. Perhaps instinctively, she understood that the microphone made possible a new style of singing...The microphone humanized her voice, enabling her to develop the expressive style for which she became famous" (x). Holiday's unique abilities opened doors of expression that allowed her to infuse a greater range of versatility and emotionality into her music.

Holiday had a visceral connection with the music she sang. For Holiday, music was a cathartic form of expression that she used to channel her frustration and sorrows. Holiday's music and her stage presence became a vehicle for self-expression and a model for communicating the wide range of women's experiences in a male-dominated, culturally inequitable society. Jackson states, "Her persona, onstage and off, evolved into an uncanny combination of vulnerability and cynicism, as she infused sad and tender love songs with the knowledge of her own painful affairs" (104). Holiday drew upon her past experiences, and instilled her responses into the material she performed. Greene notes, "A child of poverty, hard luck, and racism, Holiday could have turned into a hardened, bitter woman and a singer who could hide her emotions safely behind banal lyrics. She did not, and that she chose instead to create an art drawn from deep within her tormented soul is a testimony as much to Holiday's talent as to her courage" (xi). Holiday comments on how music became a way for her to establish a sense of pride in sharing the perspectives accrued through her life experiences, highlighted

with fractured romances, heroin addiction, incarceration for drug use, rehabilitation, and repeated episodes of betrayal and embezzlement from the men she loved. According to Holiday, “I’ve been told that nobody sings the word ‘hunger’ like I do. Or the word ‘love.’ Maybe I remember what those words are all about. Maybe I’m proud enough to *want* to remember Baltimore and Welfare Island, the Catholic institution and the Jefferson Market Court, the sheriff in front of our place in Harlem and the towns from coast to coast where I got my lumps and scars...” (168).

Holiday’s musical approach may have become an avenue for expressing her unrealized desires and a way for her to constructively confront unresolved aspects of her life. In her book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, acclaimed civil rights activist and educator Angela Davis notes, “Billie Holiday could sing with prophetic conviction about the transformative power of love because it may have come to represent for her all that she was unable to achieve in her own life” (173). Cross-communication through the expression of a song is akin to how one can be drawn into theatre. The song, like a play, show, or movie, places the performer and the audience into the story it conveys. Holiday’s material reflected her struggles rather than masking, hiding, or denying them. Jackson states, “Holiday struggled with the judgments of others all of her life, yet she continued to express herself in a raw, nakedly honest way that exposed her deepest parts to an often-unfriendly world. Her fans loved her for it” (97). This honest vulnerability became a trademark of Holiday’s work that revealed her high and her low points. Greene states, “This carefully woven tapestry of life and music was the origin of the persona that audiences came to identify with Billie” (31).

Holiday’s Transformational Impact on the Popular Jazz Songs of Her Era

Holiday transformed the music world with her ability to take a song and make it distinctly her own vehicle of expression. According to Davis, “Billie Holiday could completely

divert a song from its composer's original and often sentimental and vapid intent" (175).

Holiday's ability to infuse lyrics with her own emotional stamp and musical interpretations set her work on an upward trajectory and opened doors for a much wider range of emotional interpretation of popular songs. Gioia notes,

Holiday could take command of a lyric like no one else. Her 1936 recording for Brunswick, "I Cried for You"—the first standard she recorded and her biggest hit from the period—finds her wringing the tears from a song that so many other vocalists have delivered in a glib, matter-of-fact manner. Holiday interprets it as a melancholy torch song. Even though the band is bouncing along at an even tempo. (167)

Holiday took songs with a wide audience appeal and made each song, in its own way, a distinctive vehicle of her individual emotional expression. Davis states, "Holiday's remarkable ability as a vocalist to appropriate inconsequential love songs...as occasions for evoking and exploring complex emotional meaning is celebrated abundantly in the literature on her life and career" (162). By transforming popular songs of the day, Holiday communicated the intricacies of women's experience in the nineteen-thirties, forties and fifties. According to Davis, "Regardless of her conscious intent, her musical meditations on women's seemingly interminable love pains illuminated the ideological constrictions of gender and the ways they insinuate themselves into women's emotional lives" (163).

Holiday's expression of women's story transposed by personal experience and interpretation created an empathetic bond of commonality that allowed a basis for developing connection through an appreciation of the shared joys and woes women face in their lives. Davis states, "It is a woman's vision she presents, and as women's realities filter through the prism of her music, we are educated and enlightened about our interior emotional lives. Her message is

able to escape the ideological constraints of the lyrics. In the music, in her phrasing, her timing, the timbre of her voice, the social roots of pain and despair in women's emotional lives are given a lyrical legibility" (177). Davis further notes, "Her genius was to give her life experiences an aesthetic form that recast them as windows through which other women could peer critically at their own lives" (179). In addition to opening a forum for women's story, Holiday's presence and ability became a beacon and a role model for many women of color struggling to break through social perceptions regarding being black and female in American society.

Holiday's persona and her musical ability would instigate the turning point that propelled the image of the African American jazz diva into mainstream American society. She refined the image of Blues Diva that Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith initiated and crafted a polished, proud persona of a front woman in a jazz band. Holiday was highly influenced by the glamour of Hollywood. She adopted the imagery that Hollywood offered and transformed herself into a powerful, alluring, iconic figure. Jackson comments on Holiday's persona, "She worked on projecting an image of carefully groomed sophistication rather than the blatant sexuality of some of the 'exotic' entertainers at nightspots such as the Cotton Club, where stereotypes of a savage Africa were an excuse for daringly revealing costumes" (92). Her image of strength, beauty, and empowerment was inspiring for black women, and created an allure based on the familiar for mainstream white America.

Holiday's approach to music, and her self-created glamorous image, bridged an evolving intra-cultural curiosity by highlighting experiential commonalities. Davis states, "She [Holiday] sang songs produced by its rapidly developing popular-culture industry...[S]he boldly entered the domain of white love as it filtered through the commodified images and market strategies of Tin-Pan Alley. She revealed to her black audiences what the world of white popular culture was

about...” (171). According to Davis, “ ‘the aesthetic dimension’ of Billie Holiday’s work represents a symbiosis, drawing from and contributing to an African American social and musical history in which women’s political agency is nurtured by, and in turn nurtures, aesthetic agency” (164). Holiday’s interpretations of her material and her persona promoted and encouraged the perception of black women as beautiful and empowered rather than the previous subservient imagery and stereotypes associated with and promoted by ongoing racism in an Anglo-dominated society. Her willingness to expose her weaknesses and strengths provided a foundation of common experience that helped to form bridges of understanding for women, women of color, and for the men who might be touched by the messages that her material conveyed.

“Strange Fruit”

Holiday’s social message through music expanded and addressed the ongoing violence against people of color in America when she included the song “Strange Fruit” in her repertoire.

“Strange Fruit”

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,

And the sudden smell of burning flesh!

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,

For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,

For the sun to rot, for a for a tree to drop,

Here is strange and bitter crop. (Margolick 15)

Billie Holiday was building her career as a vocalist in the nineteen-twenties, thirties, and forties during the era that blues and jazz music were entering the consciousness of mainstream American society. Despite this artistic awakening and appreciation for African-influenced musical styles, a lasting legacy of racism continued to be exacerbated by the aftereffects of the gross inequities established through a slave-based plantation system that promoted demeaning disempowering stereotypes, marginalization, disenfranchisement, and an ongoing lack of respect for the plight and dignity of African Americans. Horrifically inhumane acts of violence from racist individuals and organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan continued to plague people of color in America. In his book *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights*, author and columnist David Margolick notes, “Lynchings—during which blacks were murdered with unspeakable brutality, often in a carnival-like atmosphere...were rampant in the South following the civil war and for many years thereafter. According to figures kept by Tuskegee Institute—conservative figures—between 1889 and 1940, 3,833 people were lynched; ninety percent of them were murdered in the South, and four-fifths of them were black” (34). Although lynchings were on the decline in the northern states, the brutality and the public spectacle that they drew were deeply disturbing. Greene states, “By the beginning of the

twentieth century, lynching with few exceptions was confined to the South. Public hangings still took place, but by this time lynching had devolved into a horrific spectacle of torture that often involved mutilation and burning of the body” (58). The ongoing brutal victimization of African American men desperately needed to be brought to the forefront of Americans’ consciousness, and a sense of empathy and understanding for individuals rights in regard to safety and respect developed and promoted in American society.

One way that this elevation of consciousness manifested was through the song “Strange Fruit.” Holiday falsely claimed to have written “Strange Fruit.” However, a man of Jewish descent, Abel Meeropol, wrote the song using the penname Lewis Allen. Meeropol wrote the lyrics, and initially, he and then his wife performed “Strange Fruit.” Meeropol was compelled to write “Strange Fruit” in response to the horror he felt in regard to the ongoing lynchings of black men in America. A graphic photograph of a lynched black man hanging from a tree motivated him to compose the lyrics of the song. In his book, Margolick includes a 1971 reflection by Meeropol: “I wrote ‘Strange Fruit’ because I hate lynching and I hate injustice and I hate the people who perpetrate it” (28). Despite the fact that Holiday did not compose “Strange Fruit,” the song was brought to her attention with the hope that she would perform it, and gained popularity and notoriety due to her interpretation of it. In Holiday’s hands, the song took flight. It was Holiday’s rendition that would bring “Strange Fruit” to complete fruition. Holiday’s interpretation of Meeropol’s song became a turning point that brought the horrors of lynching into the minds of a widening audience base. Holiday and Meeropol’s intentional and unintentional collaborative efforts created a movement towards an elevated social consciousness that stepped away from Anglo-dominant mainstream issues, and expanded a social awareness that would cross cultural boundaries and open frontiers of cultural comprehension by addressing

personal and societal concerns of another culture. Davis states, “‘Strange Fruit’ evoked the horrors of lynching at a time when black people were still passionately calling for allies in the campaign to eradicate this murderous and terroristic manifestation of racism” (183). Davis further notes how, through drawing attention to the horrors of lynching, Holiday created a platform of common concern. “[Holiday’s] songs acted as a conduit permitting others to gather insights about the emotional and social circumstances of their own lives. For black people and their politically conscious white allies ‘Strange Fruit’ publicly bore witness to the corporeal devastation occasioned by lynching, as well as the terrible psychic damage it inflicted on its victims and perpetrators alike” (194).

Holiday’s performance of “Strange Fruit” coincided with her performing at an upscale, progressive, avante garde venue called Café Society. Nicholson notes, “Billie’s residency at the Café Society gave her the opportunity to define her style in a prestigious downtown location to an extent that had been impossible before” (111). It was at Café Society that Holiday refined her distinctive style. Rather than entering the stage from the wings, Holiday would take the stage after walking through the audience. She highlighted her glamorous stately appearance by incorporating white gardenias into her hair, and performed her songs while standing, almost motionless, in the center of a pool of light.

The atmosphere promoted by Café Society turned the tables on the established Anglo-dominant status quo. Jackson states, “With its multi-racial audiences and its Left-leaning atmosphere, Café Society was a long way from the Cotton Club and its segregated white audiences. Café Society was meant to be more than a nightclub. It was a venue for expressing the Left-leaning ideals of its owner, Barney Josephson, and his clientele” (113). Café Society expanded opportunities for cultural understanding of the black experience in America. At Café

Society, Holiday's performance of "Strange Fruit" became a showstopper that drew attention to the social injustices associated with lynching. Davis states, "[Holiday's] performance of 'Strange Fruit' firmly established her as a pivotal figure in a new tendency in black musical culture that directly addressed issues of racial injustice" (181). Holiday's performance of "Strange Fruit" created a socio-cultural portal for understanding the detrimental effects of lynchings, segregation, and discrimination that, ultimately, impact American society as a whole. The introduction of "Strange Fruit" into American consciousness initiated the ongoing, arduous process of attempting to unify America's divided cultural legacy into a compassionate, cohesive whole.

Holiday's performance of "Strange Fruit" communicated the charged emotionality connected with social schisms and abuses. Her work gave a voice to the experiences associated with racism in America and provided solace and inspiration for others. Jackson notes, "'Strange Fruit' is perhaps the clearest example of Holiday's power to channel emotions through her songs. 'Holiday was putting into words what so many people had seen and lived through,' said Lena Horne. 'She seemed to be performing in melody and words the same thing I was feeling in my heart'" (115). The impact of "Strange Fruit" set off waves of understanding that would flow outwards from the musical realm into the fabric and social structure of America. Margolick notes, "To [singer and pianist] Bobby Short, the song was 'very, very pivotal,' a way of moving the tragedy of lynching out of the black press and into the white consciousness" (17). The expanding socio-cultural consciousness initiated by Holiday's performance of "Strange Fruit" highlighted the effects of racism in America. When Holiday performed in England, her performance of "Strange Fruit" brought an increased awareness of racially motivated social injustice in America to the attention of British citizens. Margolick states, "After Holiday sang

‘Strange Fruit’ at Royal Albert Hall in London, a British reviewer called the song a challenge to humanity which cannot leave any right-thinking man or woman unaffected” (120). The haunting, poetic message of horrific abuse that “Strange Fruit” conveys remains as powerful today as it did in the past. Davis notes, “Billie Holiday’s recording of ‘Strange Fruit’ persists as one of the most influential and profound examples—and continuing sites—of the intersection of music and social consciousness” (196). “Strange Fruit” was a groundbreaking phenomenon that reintroduced and reinvigorated the concept of songs as a platform for initiating social and cultural transformation. It stands as a historical testament for the need to create a compassionate understanding and way of life that includes and protects all members of American society.

Holiday’s Legacy

Billie Holiday utilized her tenacity, strength, courage, and her vulnerabilities. She blended these attributes to create a phenomenal talent as a jazz vocalist and used these components to forge a livelihood and a career. She was determined, and succeeded in establishing herself as an internationally acclaimed artist. Her musical and lyrical abilities and her persona added a personal touch to her work that addressed the strengths and vulnerabilities inherent in being a woman, a black woman, and a person of color in America. Davis states, “Indeed, her own music proved that she was capable of negotiating an entrance into the dominant culture that did not disconnect her from her people. She was able to recast for her own ends the very elements of that culture that might have devoured her talents and her identity” (172). Holiday’s artistry added to, embellished, and polished the concept of black pride. Her work advanced her own and others’ personal transformation and experiential expression, and in doing so provided lasting inspiration for personal, cultural, and social change. ““Would my empathy for and with the underdogs of the world have drawn me into the same career paths if I had never

heard of Billie Holiday? I doubt it,' said George Sinclair, a native Southerner who spent his life working with the underprivileged and the disenfranchised. 'If Billie Holiday lit the fuse, she unquestionably fed the flame'" (Margolick 19). Holiday's contributions to music and (through her book *Lady Sings the Blues*) literature helped to pull forth a heightened social consciousness and an increased awareness of social inequities and civil injustice. Her work opened up avenues for understanding aspects of commonality and differences that form the human experience.

Holiday's life was often under social scrutiny, and was marred by arrests and hospitalizations for rehabilitation. Her inability to completely disengage from heroin addiction adversely affected her career, her health, and her image in a society with little compassion or understanding for the ravages of her addiction. In 1959, at age 47, Holiday collapsed. She was hospitalized and diagnosed with severe cirrhosis. During her hospitalization, drugs were found in a Kleenex box at her bedside, and she was arrested for drug possession. Billie Holiday died alone in the hospital on July 17, 1959. "She died virtuously penniless. Her worldly fortune amounted to just \$848.54 in cash" (Nicholson 226). According to Nicholson, "Few careers in the performing arts have ended ignominiously yet begun so promisingly as that of Billie Holiday. By the time she was twenty-three she had performed and recorded with some of the biggest names in jazz, including Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Fletcher Henderson, Jimmie Lunceford, Benny Carter, Bunny Berigan, Lester Young, Artie Shaw, and Teddy Wilson" (229). Billie Holiday's music and life story provide a compelling testament to what it is to be black in America. Nicholson states, "Today she is part romantic martyr, claimed by feminists and civil rights campaigners, and part heroine of excess whose details of self-extinction threaten to obscure her genuine achievements in jazz" (234). Holiday's work provided and continues to inspire an increased awareness of cultural and sociological inequities. Her take on jazz and her

contributions to music are still inspirational to many musicians, music students, and music listeners.

Tribute...For Billie

One solitary...everlasting white flower from Lady Day's hair.
 Gaining momentum, rising and falling through musky darkness
 She made... the mood...simmer... on the edge of a key

*with glossy hues of sex, and rape, and heroin...and too many men
 who didn't seem to care
 only there for late night gigs in cheap... smoky bars*

4 a.m. Dead of night Heat of July
 The inescapable smell of bleach on stark stiff hospital sheets
 Lester's horn calls to you from behind a gossamer veil
 Alone again...and then... you're gone

just shy of daybreak

Your touch of sadness... your sweet jazz kisses... still find their way to the heart.

Appendix

I would like to address my impetus for researching the subject matter in this report. I was not born in the early jazz era, and I was not born black. I am a product of white middle-class 1960s rural suburbia. Despite my upbringing, which was laced with large portions of white privilege, I strongly sensed from an early age that things were not fair and equitable in American society. My feelings of anxiety about cultural and societal inequities were seemingly impossible to resolve or escape. I felt unable to move out of the protective bubble that encased my affluent life in Marin County California.

The events of the Civil Rights Movement and the Feminist Movement initiated an awakening of consciousness and resistance regarding the ongoing adverse affects of racism in

America. Though revolutionary and inspirational, the protest movements of the 'sixties and 'seventies and the ongoing resistance of oppression in today's society seems to have fallen far short in being able to create cultural understanding and establish a society that is inclusive and compassionate to all of its members. Unfortunately, American society is still riddled with inequitable social constructs. I have personalized this struggle and briefly found some resolution through forging rewarding and inspiring culturally diverse friendships and familial relationships. Eventually, my inescapable cultural curiosity found its way into the educational system. The process of acquiring my Associates Degree at College of Marin and the pursuit of my Bachelor's Degree in Humanities at Dominican University of California has been an extremely rewarding and enriching experience. Many classes that I have taken throughout this process have dramatically increased my awareness and understanding of the evolution of American society, a society that I care about as a whole, and am a part of.

My initiation into music and protest music came to me through having been raised in the 1960s and 'seventies, and infused me with a love for rock and roll music, the blues, and reggae. Jazz was a part of my childhood that I saw (in my rather limited and clueless manner) as being dated and rather hokey. I grew up in a musical family and fell in love with the idea of being a singer when I was twelve. I never would have imagined that my love for singing would lure me into the world of jazz, or lead me to be continually inspired by the work of Billie Holiday, but it did, and I am! Researching Holiday's work and her life story for college projects, coupled with the fact that almost every jazz song I sing has been touched in some way and gained depth and levels of inspiration through Holiday's unique musical and lyrical approach, has been deeply enriching for me in both an educational and a personal manner. Holiday's approach to music gave me inspiration and permission to allow myself to be vulnerable, to access and utilize my

own unique voice and individuality. Her example encourages me to infuse the songs I sing with the emotions that I am grappling with, and be willing to share through music my struggles and strong suits. She has been a role model for me, and for many others, by advancing the concept of using music as a vehicle for emotional self-expression.

The 2006 Warner Brothers movie *Happy Feet* is an animated film about a penguin that is searching for his own individual heart-song. The phenomenal concept that this film puts forth is how each and every one of us, in our own unique way, has a song. I firmly believe that this aspect of our individuality can be used through myriad ways to effect socio-cultural understanding and appreciation. These avenues toward cultural unity can come through many forms of expression; a few of them are music, the arts, one's livelihood, hobbies, letter writing, and chatting with neighbors. The possibilities for means of self-expression are as wide as one's imagination. There are a multitude of avenues open to each individual to effect positive socio-cultural understanding and promote a lasting change through a unity based on the celebration and appreciation of our widely diverse population. One's endeavors towards these ends may be large or minute. What is crucially important is that we all somehow find ways to effectively communicate our perspectives in order that we may truly be an equitably united American society.

In closing, I would like to communicate how important it is to create, maintain, and promote avenues of cultural compassion and understanding. It is my belief that American society has been focused on a platform of self-sufficiency that is spiraling out of control while negating the importance of socio-cultural equity. This approach can only lead our country further astray from the foundation of unity that has been promoted and exploited since Europeans and Africans first set foot on the land that is now called America.

Works Cited

- Davis, Angela Y., *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. New York: Random House, 1998. Print.
- Gioia, Ted. *The History of Jazz 2nd Edition*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011. Print
- Greene, Meg. *Billie Holiday: A Biography*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007. Print.
- Hentoff, Nat and Albert J. McCarthy, Eds. *Jazz: New Perspectives on the History of Jazz by Twelve of the World's Foremost Jazz Critics and Scholars*. New York: Da Capo-Press, 1974. Print.
- Holiday, Billie, and William Dufty. *Lady Sings the Blues: The Searing Autobiography of an American Musical Legend*. London: Penguin Group, 1956. Print
- Jackson, Buzzy. *A Bad Woman Feeling Good: Blues and the Women Who Sing Them*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005. Print.
- Margolick, David. *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights*. Philadelphia: Running Press Book Publishers, 2000. Print.
- Nicholson, Stuart. *Billie Holiday*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1995. Print.
- Wald, Elijah. *The Blues: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010. Print.